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ABSTRACT

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Reevaluating the Basic Public Speaking Course

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Abstract

This essay develops the position that the basic public speaking course is in need of reevaluation. Topics discussed include the importance of adopting a critical pedagogical stance, Freire's (1983) banking vs. problem-posing concepts of education, the problems arising from the prevalent use of teaching assistants as public speaking instructors, and redescribing the basic public speaking course. This essay calls for teachers in the communication discipline to reevaluate their methods, content, and pedagogical stance in order to provide students with the most valuable and meaningful course possible.

Introduction

The basic communication course is the center of the speech communication discipline (Hugenberg,1994). However, there seems to be little agreement as to how to teach speaking skills, what skills to teach, or if teaching skills is actually effective. This may be a strong indication that the basic public speaking course is in need of serious reevaluation. I do not propose that teachers in the communication discipline reach a consensus, but rather that they reevaluate their methods, content, and pedagogical stance in order to provide students with the most valuable and meaningful course possible.

In this essay, I develop the position that the basic public speaking course needs to be reevaluated for many reasons. As it stands, the course does not provide students with the opportunity to explore the power of language and the necessity of effective communication. The course is far removed from their lives and does not promote critical thinking. My argument is presented in four sections. The first deals with the importance of adopting a critical pedagogical stance. The second section is a discussion of Freire's "banking" versus problem-posing concepts of education. The public speaking instructor is redescribed in the third section, followed, finally, by a redescription of the public speaking class itself.

Reevaluating Pedagogy

In reevaluating the basic public speaking course, it is useful to discuss not only teaching methods and content, but also to discuss the pedagogical stance one adopts. Giroux (1992) suggests what is needed is, "a pedagogy developed around new languages capable of acknowledging the multiple, contradictory, and complex subject positions people occupy within different social, cultural, and economic locations" (p. 21). In doing so, an instructor of communication can provide students a truly open forum to explore the power of language and discover a reality in flux. In recent years, attention has focused on the hidden curriculum, "the tacit teaching of social and economic norms and expectations to students in schools" (Apple & King, 1983, p. 82). In order to deal with this, Vallance (1973/1974/1983) suggests we adopt a critical attitude toward schooling and allow ourselves to ask what an institution's nonacademic functions and effects really are (p. 11).

Swartz (1997) defines the practice of critical pedagogy as, "The process of helping students to identify and critique the ways language reifies and structures human social reality for the purpose of empowering students to engage more actively in both the construction and critique of society" (p. 137). I argue that this is exactly the kind of pedagogical stance that is necessary for teaching a basic communication course, if it is going to be valuable and meaningful for the students.

Teachers must recognize that it is impossible to communicate, and thus teach, without addressing political questions.

> All you do, everything you hear, wherever you go, you expose yourself to politics and thereby risk making implicit political commitments to things, ideas, and people you may not particularly like. But, if you continue to breathe, you will continue to be a political animal (Hart, 1985, p. 162).

For everything that is taught and validated there are numerous things not taught and, by default, margionalized. As Kenneth Burke (1984) states, "A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing-a focus upon object A involves a neglect of object B" (p. 49). An instructor can benefit from realizing the consequences of the pedagogy they adopt, and become a more responsible teacher. Students are mislead by the perception that they must adopt the teacher's view in order to do well in the class. It is imperative from the very beginning, that teachers of the basic public speaking course inform their students that they do not have to think like their teacher, but they do have to think! As Hart suggests, "Our commitment is to equip with effective communication all who desire it, and to convince those who resist our blandishments that they are missing a world of riches when they refuse to utilize all of their communicative capacities" (p. 164). Numerous definitions of effective communication have been proposed. I would say that in the public speaking

classroom, effective communication is that which builds community. I argue that the main point of public speaking is not structure or performance, but rather communicating something meaningful, developing ideas, justifying and providing rationale for arguments, and bringing community together.

Banking vs. Problem-posing Education

In reevaluating the basic public speaking course, an effective place to start is at the very core of how it is taught. Paulo Freire (1970/1983) presents a very insightful contrast of teaching models. I argue, as does Freire, that a move from a "banking" concept of education to a problem-posing method would be beneficial both for the students and the course as a whole. In the "banking" concept of education, the act of teaching becomes the act of depositing. The students are "containers" or "receptacles" to be filled with the teacher's narration. This narration is detached from reality, and "leads the students to memorize mechanically the narrated content" (p. 183). It is a detriment to students because knowledge is presented as a gift from the knowledgeable teacher bestowed upon the students who know nothing. The banking model perpetuates a view of education voiced by Berger and Luckmann (1966).

> Potential actors of institutionalized actions must be *systematically* acquainted with these meanings. This necessitates some form of "educational" process...All

> transmission requires some sort of social apparatus. That is, some types are designated as transmitters, other types recipients of the traditional "knowledge" (p. 70).

The "banking" concept limits the students' activities in the classroom to that of the recipient, "receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (Freire, 1970/1983, p. 284). The teacher is designated as the transmitter. The danger extends beyond the constricting roles to the content of what is being taught. Traditional knowledge becomes reified, products of human activity are seen as something greater than a human product (Berger & Luckmann). The knowledge is transmitted without being questioned. "The reified world is, by definition, a dehumanized world" (Berger & Luckmann, p. 89). As Freire points out, the more student work on storing these deposits, "the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (p. 285). To combat against the effects of the "banking" concept of education such as, passivity, unquestioned adaptation, conformity, and reification Freire present the problem-posing method.

Under this view, education is a dialogue where not only the students learn from the teacher, but the teacher learns from the students. Reality is no longer presented as a stagnant, unchanging fact, but is constantly unveiled. "The students- no longer docile listeners- are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" (Freire,

1970/1983, p. 288). Within this model, students are able to see the world as constantly changing and transforming. Instead of merely passively adapting to it, they can question it, challenge it, and understand that they are agents with the power to act and change their reality. As Swartz (1997) points out,

> With Freire's problem-posing approach to education, students learn that the world becomes conceptualized and "known" as a set of potentials to be engaged by the critical mind. The act of education, therefore, is the act of this engagement or , rather, the process of *knowing* that one is enabled to actualize his or her potential in transforming the world (p. 143).

Education under the problem-posing model gives students the opportunity to learn to think critically, to question reality, and challenge the world around them. Rather than accepting the teacher's version of a stagnant reality, the student is encouraged to experience the world and understand it in terms of their place in it, and their power to transform it. Through dialog, the student unveils reality, as opposed to accepting the limited and detached view of reality the teacher chooses to offer them.

From within this problem-posing approach to education, it is possible to reevaluate the taken for granted concept of authority. Swartz (1997) states, "that 'authority' can be reconceptualized as 'responsibility'"(p. 143). In the classroom, authority becomes an element of mutual respect, as

opposed to a stifling or powerful position held only by the teacher. The teacher is respected for "drawing into focus the cultural forces constraining the student's ability to articulate their own sense of 'self'" (p. 143). With problem-posing education there is no longer a hierarchy of the knowing bestowing information upon the unknowing. A dialog takes place between the students, teacher, and the constantly transforming world. Their is no room for authority in the hierarchical or traditional sense of the word. The traditional sense of the word is what Kohlberg (1970/1983) describes as, "learning to live in the classroom means learning to live in a world in which there is impersonal authority, in which a relative stranger gives orders and wields power" (p. 62). Here however, the teacher is no longer the superior, or leader, but more of a facilitator, responsible for the influence of what they teach, and how they teach it. As Swartz (1997) states, "Under this view, teachers have 'authority' in their classrooms to the extent that they, as intellectuals, claim responsibility for the 'influence' of their pedagogies" (p. 144).

It is exciting to imagine a classroom where multiple views are presented and validated, where students learn not just from the teacher, but from each other as well, and that they gain fundamental tools to discover, experience and act in the world around them. To critically question reality, the status quo, and the way cultures reify language, is extremely powerful. Students who are encouraged to engage in

these activities are being educated in a valuable and meaningful way.

In order to help students engage in these critical activities, Swartz (1997) suggests encouraging "the exploration of how 'authority', as a concept, exists in our society" (p. 146). This exploration produces classroom questions such as, "What constitutes 'knowledge'? Who has the right to know? What justifications for that 'right' exist" (p. 146)? In the basic public speaking course that I teach we use a textbook that has a cultural perspective (Jaffe, 1995). Not only is there a chapter devoted to culture and public speaking, but culture is a theme that runs through the entire book. In my classroom, I encourage students to explore the concept of culture. Questions that arise for discussion are: What is the dominant culture? Who decides what those dominant norms and beliefs are? How are co-cultural groups margionalized? Who is the voice of our culture? Who does that voice represent? How do our cultural beliefs affect public speaking? Through these discussions, the students begin to recognize that the world is not a fixed object waiting to be understood, but rather a constantly changing, fluid concept that is constructed by all human beings together. They realize the power humans have. Students can learn that we, as a society, make the rules. We can deny the definitions that others place on us. This is the process of bringing Swartz's (1997) idea of localized resistance into the classroom. Instead of accepting a

nonactive, passive role, students can become active agents in the construction and transformation of their world.

As it stands, the students' activities are narrowed down to storing items. Items that will only be forgotten when they are no longer required to be regurgitated for exams. Problem-posing education bypasses these problem of rote memorization, useless information storing and passivity in the leaning process. Instead it offers an opportunity to bring the students actively into the learning process, and places them at the center of it, where they can start the process of becoming powerful questioners of, and agents in, their world.

Redescribing the Public Speaking Instructor

Too many basic public speaking courses are taught by teaching assistants (Hugenberg, 1994). This is unfair to both the students and the graduate students. The students receive, in many cases, an inferior education, while the teaching assistants are unprepared to take on a task with such large responsibilities. Students are being taught perhaps the only course they will receive in communication by the least experienced, least knowledgeable teachers. This is a disservice to the students and the department as a whole. The basic public speaking course is the main course marketed to the rest of the university. The communication department depends on the revenue this course generates for its survival (Swartz, 1997, p. 151). If it is often the only education

many students receive in communication studies, than it must be as valuable and meaningful as possible.

Schell (1992) states that the basic composition course has been feminized by English departments. She analyzes the way women composition teachers are constructed materially and metaphorically, and suggests ways to chip "away at the grand-master narrative that has kept women in composition in a 'feminized' position" (p.60). Swartz (1997) argues that the basic communication course has also been feminized and margionalized. "The instructional staffs of the basic courses are...subordinate- they are burdened by extra sections and capacity-bursting enrollments" (p. 153). The basic communication course supports the department, while at the same time it is being feminized. It is clear that this course must be reevaluated and redescribed. For the benefit of all students, who incidentally are paying for their education, it is imperative that we as a discipline provide them with a more meaningful and valuable education.

The communication department should value the basic public speaking or communication course enough to give it the attention it deserves. It should be taught by experienced, prepared teachers, that have the power to implement new curricula and new theories. I know, as a teaching assistant, that I am in no position to change the textbooks, syllabus, or curriculum in my class. What is being "transmitted" is what Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to as reified knowledge. I argue that continuing to use teaching

assistants as instructors perpetuates this idea of reified traditional knowledge. Graduate students are neither adequately versed in theory, nor prepared for the responsibility of teaching classes on their own.

The narrative the teacher brings into the classroom is the story that guides the class. The conception of teaching most frequently narrated is that of helping students individually to meet traditional educational goals (Strine, 1993, p. 368). This concept of instruction is very common and quite functional. However, Strine suggests another concept of teaching that involves the crossing or dissolving of borders. The emphasis in this narration is less on teaching methods and more about educational priorities. "As institutional borders setting the classroom apart from the rest of social life are crossed or dissolved, so too are traditional educational goals emphasizing competitive individual achievement and the teacher's hierarchical role in seeing that those goals are carried out (Strine, 1993, p. 371). This narration can effect the teaching process in important ways. Giroux (1992) states that:

> By being able to listen critically to the voices of other students, teachers become boarder-crossers through their ability to not only make different narratives available to themselves and other students but also by legitimating difference as a basic condition for understanding the limits of one's own voice (p. 170).

Strine concludes that the teaching practices this story authorizes "show clearly that teaching and learning are actually reciprocal enterprises; teaching works best when it involves responsive learning from interactions with students" (p. 375).

Unfortunately, teaching assistants are in no position, when beginning instruction, to be self-reflexive and critically examine their narrative. It is crucial that all teachers examine what they are saying and not saying in the classroom. Rorty's (1989) discussion of contingency and one's final vocabulary emphasizes how important it is that teachers are self-reflexive. For Rorty, an "ironist" is someone who has continuing doubts about the final vocabulary they use (p. 73). I contend that to recognize the contingency of their vocabulary and their narrative is crucial, and more experienced teachers are better equipped than teaching assistants to do so.

The department must take responsibility for the quality of instruction in the public speaking classroom. I suggest that teaching assistants should be just that, teaching *assistants*. Helping professors with their classes and slowly being immersed into the classroom environment is much better training, and better quality instruction for students who have a professor for their teacher. Graduate students are thrown into the classroom and expected to get by. I can testify that I did get by, but what was the quality level of my instruction? Did my students really gain a valuable and

meaningful education? I'm sure I will do a much better job next semester, and the next, and so on. However, I am concerned about the consequences of my learning process. I learn as I go, but would it not be better for the students to have a teacher who has learned sufficient knowledge, had a wealth of experiences, and who has prepared adequately for the responsibility of teaching?

Redescribing the Public Speaking Class

I am learning that there are countless matters that must be taken into consideration when teaching any class, including the basic public speaking course. For example, I believe that gender sensitivity is crucial in education. Wood and Lenze (1991) describe, "repeated, often unconscious instances of gender insensitivity that contribute to a chilly climate may involve content- what is taught- and/or process- how it is taught" (p. 16). The author suggest ways in which gender sensitivity can be encouraged in schools. "Instructors are the most important source of change in institutional policies, attitudes, and behaviors regarding gender sensitivity" (p. 18). One suggestion is instructors help administrators choose visiting speakers for campus who emphasize gender sensitivity. I propose that this be implemented and taken one step further. Students in basic public speaking courses should be required to go and see the visiting speakers. Not only will they have a chance to see what they are learning about in action, but large attendance

would help to validate gender sensitivity as an important issue, as well as help students become more a part of the communication department. The more involved students are, the greater the opportunity for valuable learning experiences.

Hayward (1993) states that incorporating sensitivity to multiculturalism into a public speaking classroom can be an extremely challenging endeavor. However, as challenging as it is, steps must be taken to incorporate multicultural sensitivity just as they should be taken to incorporate gender sensitivity. The classroom is a more diverse place every year, and a climate that is inclusive of everyone must be a priority. I try to be sensitive to multiculturalism by making discussions of culture a high priority. The Jaffe (1995) text fosters interest in multiculturalism by providing multiple views of the world and public speaking. Of course the dominant culture in the U. S. is the culture most often expressed however, a variety of other cultural and co-cultural groups are a part of the text as well. For example, African-American, Native American, Japanese, Egyptian, Madagascan and various European and Eastern cultures are represented throughout the text.

Others have called for a reevaluation of the basic speech course. For example, it has been suggested that the primary goal of the basic course in speech should be to investigate oral communication rather than public speaking (Cocetti, 1991). He states that fundamental to understanding

oral communication is understanding the oral mind, and that the oral mind responds best to narrative structure. The narrative not only entertains, but instructs, persuades, and involves memorable language. This demonstrates that stories function at multiple levels. Miller (1990) states that there is nothing more universal or natural to human beings that telling stories. "The human capacity to tell stories is one way men and women collectively build a significant and orderly world around themselves. With fictions we investigate, perhaps invent, the meaning of human life" (p. 69). Narrative structure should be incorporated into the basic speech course as major means of organizing a speech because it reveals what is engaging and memorable in public speaking.

With the Jaffe (1995) text, I am able to incorporate narrative structure into my course because there is an entire chapter devoted to the narrative. Jaffe states that many scholars agree that the telling of narratives is a fundamental characteristic of being human, and that these shared stories help us organize and understand our world (p. 295). The narrative is vital to the public speaking course and yet it is often left out. Stephen Lucas' (1995) text for the basic public speaking course, for example, includes no discussion or chapter on the narrative. He states that the three major goals of public speaking are to "persuade", "inform", and "entertain" (p. 3). These goals are accomplished through three types of speeches: informative,

persuasive and special occasion speaking. Nowhere is the narrative mentioned, validated or encouraged. Considering the fundamental importance of the narrative structure, I argue that it should be incorporated into all basic public speaking courses.

Yet another problem with the basic public speaking course is the neglected introduction of new theory into the textbooks used. In a recent review of five introductory communication textbooks, Swartz (1997),

> found no substantive discussion of any post- 1967 theoretical or critical development in our field. [What he found instead was] a traditional and skills-oriented approach to public speaking that takes little notice of the role that ideology, history, or culture play in constructing rhetorical values and in contextualizing the communication environment (p. 161).

Swartz's review emphasizes the need for reevaluation of the basic public speaking course. While there have been major theoretical developments in the field of communication, our basic texts do not reflect these advances. As Kuhn (1970) states, "Textbooks themselves aim to communicate the vocabulary and syntax of a contemporary scientific language" (p. 136). The vocabulary these textbooks are communicating is one that has not been updated for almost thirty years. They stifle the field and, by default, give the impression that the discipline of communication has stagnated. Hugenberg (1994) states that textbooks available for the

basic communication course are a disappointment because, for the most part, they continue to teach in the tradition Aristotle outlined 2000 years ago. As I argued before, the basic public speaking course may be the only exposure many students have to the field of communication. These books are both misleading students and doing them a disservice by not representing the theoretical achievements that have been made in the last three decades.

Inspired by Swartz's (1997) argument regarding the rigid distinctions between informative and persuasive speaking (p. 162), I feel compelled to extend it. Not only does this distinction between informative and persuasive speaking treat, "discourse as if discourse had an essence that could be either correctly or incorrectly learned", but it suggests that these distinctions exist in contemporary society (p. 162). In our "overcommunicated culture" no message from the media, advertising, music, art, or literature is purely informative. We should be teaching students to be wise information consumers, equipped with the tools to decipher the barrage of messages we receive everyday. As Giroux (1981) points out in a discussion of the mass media, "As popular culture became more standardized in its attempt to reproduce not only goods but also the needs to consume those goods, 'industrialized' culture reached into new forms of communication to spread its message" (p. 40). By teaching this distinction we are supporting the notion that the mass media wants to "inform" us. This is not true, every message

is trying to persuade us of something. Messages persuade us to buy this toilet paper over that one, to quit smoking, to read to our children, to be an organ donor. They persuade us to believe using profanity in music is appropriate or desirable, that this is beautiful and that is not. The point is, by stating that this distinction exists we are not helping our students navigate the real world. The distinction between informative and persuasive speaking is anachronistic at best. Every message we receive is in some way trying to persuade us. Our students should understand that so they are better equipped to deal with the communication in today's culture.

Simply training students is not enough. If students do not learn to think critically in college, there will most certainly be no room for it in the workplace. A university must have its own agenda, separate from the agenda of business. Let students grow and learn in college, and leave technical training in the workplace. Swartz concludes that, in the absence of critical pedagogy, the course becomes "formalized, mechanistic, and antidialectical" (p. 152). As the course plays out in this way, all the detrimental attributes of the "banking" model of education are presented. It implies that there is one correct way to understand and "perform" public speaking. That, yet again, the teacher is right, superior, and all-knowing. While the student must passively receive the gift of knowledge the teachers has chosen to offer. The basic public speaking course that

emphasizes just skills, goes against everything I have argued for in this essay. There must be a dialog for the students to gain a meaningful, valuable education that builds community.

Conclusion

My reevaluation of the basic public speaking class is a vision quite different from what is occurring presently. In this vision, the teacher has adopted a critical pedagogy that recognizes the contingency of language, the impact of ideology, and the importance of validating multiple and varied views. This pedagogical stance champions Freire's problem-posing concept of education and redescribes authority. The instructor is not a teaching assistant, and therefore has the power to make changes: in the curriculum such as incorporating new theories; in their teaching style by emphasizing self-reflexivity and; in the narrative they choose to bring into the classroom. Finally, the basic public speaking course validates the importance of the narrative structure, the need for gender and multicultural sensitivities, provides students with a valuable, meaningful education that is not dictated by business, but focused on developing a critical, active agent in society.

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